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THE BIBLICAL WORLD

CONTINUING

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IF one looks back over the events of the theological world which have taken place during the past six months, three elements in the situation present themselves: There has been apparent everywhere a feeling of unrest; men have shown alarm, either for themselves or for others. The uncertainty, which seems to characterize those to whom we have been accustomed to look, has led to a still greater uncertainty on the part of those who do not form opinions for themselves. It is evident to anyone who is observant that a change of position, at least in reference to details, is taking place in the case of many men. It is true, moreover, that these changes, or, as it may be better described, this progress is seen in the utterances of men whose names have been before the theological world for several decades; the older men as well as the younger give evidence of having developed. One may not fail to note also that in some sections of the country the unrest is limited wholly to concern about the position of others, these sections furnishing little evidence that any changes are taking place in them. In pulpit, and in pew, in the secular and in the religious press, there is a feverishness, which bodes ill or good according to the spirit which prevails.

THE SIGNIFICANCE of the unrest is easily determined. It means activity. No one will deny that there has been an ever increasing activity in thought concerning all matters which relate to the Bible and the church. In these days, such activity is no longer limited to the clergy; our laymen are wide-awake, and the number of men outside of the ministry, who find pleasure in directing their thoughts to the burning questions of the day rapidly increases. This activity has seemed to be more intense of late than ever before. It could be wished that a better spirit might characterize it than has been indicated in certain quarters. One can think of nothing better than the freest discussion, and it may be expected that when the period of discussion has passed, warm as it may be, there will follow here, as, for example, in Scotland, a time when men holding widely different views will be able to work together peacefully in the same communion.

In reference to one thing care is needed; nothing should be done to diminish this activity. Let the discussion go on; let it grow still warmer if need be. It is only in this way that the right end will be gained.

THE THIRD ELEMENT is the honesty which seems to characterize the utterances of all parties. However conservative, or liberal, it is safe to assume that, at least, in a great majority of cases, there is true sincerity. But is true sincerity ever accompanied by any but the right spirit? Experience shows that honesty of purpose does not always carry with it breadth of spirit. This is something, which, however desirable, cannot always be expected. There is a general desire to know more about these things which are now being discussed. It is conceded that much valuable information has been out of the reach of the majority of people. Not a few wonder why this information has not already been given. Be that as it may, the fullest information is now within the grasp of all. There is also a growing desire to look at all these things from what may be called the historical point of view. Men are beginning to recognize that while, "the essential facts of Christianity are unchangeable and final, the understanding of these facts by the general

Christian church, as by the individual Christian, is progressive. Progress in theology involves better statements of individual truths, and more perfect adjustment of these truths to each other, resulting in the growing understanding of the revealed thoughts of God in their purity, harmony, and unity. No human statement of divine truth is to be regarded as final; any dogma which is in conflict with the enlightened and living conscience of man, is doomed. Ecclesiastical dogmas, which have had wide, almost universal acceptance, would, if now accepted, wreck the faith of ages. The theological movement of our age is not that of an eddy, or a whirlpool, but that of the Gulf Stream, under the guidance of the provident spirit of God, bearing us on 'towards that far-off, divine event,' towards which the whole creation moves. We are as near to God as the patriarchs, the prophets, or the apostles. God has not spoken his last word. He never will speak his last word. He is the living, and immanent God, speaking to all men of all religions to the end of the world."¹

IN RESPONSE to a demand based upon the general desire to which reference has been made the *American Institute of Sacred Literature* is about to organize the *Bible Students' Reading Guild*, the purpose of which will be to draw together those who desire to undertake a common course of reading with a view to securing an intelligent conception of the Old and New Testaments. The work of the Guild will cover four years. In the first, the subject for consideration will be the Life of Christ; in the second, the Foreshadowings of the Christ, or Old Testament Prophecy; in the third, the Development of the Church; in the fourth, Old Testament Literature. The plan, which is more fully presented elsewhere in this number (see p. 463), includes the reading of a small number of carefully selected books, together with those portions of the sacred Scriptures which furnish the material for the subject of the year. In order that the work may come within the reach of the largest possible number, the

¹ Professor George W. Northrup, D.D., in an address before the Divinity School of the University of Chicago, May 9th, 1894.

list of books is not an extended one. Full directions for the work will be given and it will be possible for any one, willing to spend thirty minutes a day, to do the work required.

THE SPIRIT of this work will be entirely in harmony with the statement made above. The books selected for reading will be standard books, acceptable to all. No effort will be made to introduce the "special teachings" of any class. The effort will be a sincere and honest one to bring into the possession of the reader a reasonable familiarity with the facts and the general teachings. In such work much, it must be confessed, depends upon the spirit. A large proportion of the work in these modern times is rendered null and void because of the spirit which characterizes it, and the methods employed in conducting it. Sincerity and simplicity, we believe, should characterize every attempt to deal with the most sacred of all subjects, the Word of God, and in this spirit the work proposed is undertaken.

IT MAY BE ASKED, why introduce a new course? Are there not sufficient already in the field? In answer to this it may be said that the new course is intended to meet certain difficulties, the force of which has been felt by many people. These are (1) *lack of time*. There are thousands and tens of thousands of people who can find a few minutes each day for work of this kind, but who are unable to do any large amount of consecutive study. The courses already in existence are of such a nature as practically to prevent this large class of people from doing anything. It is further believed that work undertaken thus will lead to additional work, and that in the end many will be led into higher and more thorough courses of study. (2) *Lack of definiteness*. The majority of people feel the need of a guide in such work. They have time for reading if only they knew what to read. So many books are recommended that there must be a selection. If, now, a definite plan of reading may be suggested, the undirected and misdirected effort of many may be guided in such a manner as to lead to definite results.

FROM THIS point of view the new movement will enter upon the experiment. That it is an experiment we are entirely willing to concede. It is quite certain, however, if the books have been judiciously selected and if the plan in any measure fulfills the expectation of its originators, results will be attained the value of which will be very great. Readers of the *BIBLICAL WORLD* during the past ten years have watched with much interest the development of experiments along similar lines which have accomplished, at least in many cases, far more than was expected of them. The interest and sympathy of these same readers will, we feel quite sure, be accorded this new experiment, in the hope that help may come to many for whom the right kind of help has not yet been provided.